



ANC Women's League

"[The ANC's] main fear was that, if the FSAW were constituted on the basis of an individual membership, it would compete against the ANCWL to the detriment of the latter. In taking this position, the ANC revealed a degree of ambivalence towards the FSAW that it would never entirely overcome."

With these words of [Cheryl Walker's](#), we left the matter of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW or FEDSAW). Now we look at the ANC and its Women's League, founded in 1948. Women had been admitted to ANC membership for the first time five years earlier, in 1943.

The Short History of the ANCWL on its [web site](#) recalls the formation of FEDSAW as the major turning point for the

League:

“Organisationally, the Federation of South African Women, formed in 1954 as an umbrella body, helped the ANCWL's activities to spread. It was the first indication that the ANCWL wanted to be involved in improving the lot of women nationally, and not only within their own organisation. Federation brought together [women] from the ANCWL, Coloured People's Organisation, Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress of Democrats.”

From this writer's point of view, the ANC Women's League's sense of ownership, verging on entitlement of monopoly, is benign and not problematic. The formation of FEDSAW was a stepping-stone, and FEDSAW's disappearance was not a problem, if the ANC WL's rise was a consequence of FEDSAW's demise, according to this view.

“The impact of women's activities led the male leadership to recognise the potential of the women's struggle. Thus started the integration of women into ANC structures. In 1956 ANCWL President Lilian Ngoyi was elected the first women to join the ANC NEC.”

Lilian Ngoyi was President of both the League and the Federation at that time.

Women had been members of the ANC since 1943. Now, the male leadership “recognised the potential of the women's struggle,” but for what? Did it recognise the potential of

FEDSAW to organise something that could be as powerful as the ANC but independent from the ANC? And did they therefore seek to subordinate FEDSAW to the ANC, thereby killing FEDSAW?

Or, did it recognise and exploit the potential of women as a conservative force within the ANC?

Or, did it recognise women as a revolutionary force, and if so, what did the ANC do to maximise the revolutionary potential of the women?

See the document linked below for more of this history, and for relevant points from the current (2003) [ANCWL constitution](#). Here are some of them:

- *The Women's League is based on the policies and principles of the African National Congress.*
- *[Members must] Combat propaganda detrimental to the interests of the ANC and defend the policy and programmes of the ANCWL and the ANC;*
- *The Women's League is an integral part of the African National Congress and is part of its mobilising machinery.*
- *The ANCWL shall receive an annual budget, together with the supplementary grants for specific projects and tasks from the office of the Treasurer General of the ANC.*

It is very clear from the above that the ANC WL is intended by the drafters of this constitution to be a handmaiden of the

ANC, without autonomy.

In the next session, we will look at the Progressive Women's Movement (PWM) and ask: Is the PWM supposed to be a subsidiary, or junior partner, of the ANCWL, and therefore of the ANC? Or is it a wider movement, open to all women, of which the ANCWL is only one part? To what extent have the problems and tensions of the FEDSAW period been solved, or have they not been solved? To what extent have those problems re-appeared, in fact, and with greater virulence than before?

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [ANCWL Short History, and points from 2003 ANCWL Constitution.](#)
- A PDF file of the reading text is attached
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here.](#)